



Logo of the 10th Language and Development Conference

Language in School

The institution of 11 “official” languages in South Africa, sanctified by the Constitution, is as far as we know based on “human rights” precepts. Consequently, because human rights are passive, what has been done so far has not been very effective in terms of bringing the languages to life.

The teaching of children in the mother-tongue that they have from home, when they enter school for the first time, may be a human right. But if so, then it is not yet being well observed in South Africa. Motivation for change in this regard comes not from “human rights” but from the relatively poor rate of success in attempting to educate people in languages (English or Afrikaans) that they did not learn in the home and therefore do not, in the beginning, know.

Imposing on young children the stress of attempting, at a very young age, to learn in language that they do not understand

and have not yet been taught, is a cruelty and of course, it is not successful. On average, children who are presented with this hurdle, do not advance as fast as children who are welcomed into the formal education system in their own language.

Teaching of children first in their mother-tongue, and then teaching them English, using their mother tongue, with this transition taking place over several years of schooling, is now a political demand.

The above paragraphs are taken from our Communist University course on Education. They state the continuing problem sufficiently well for our purposes.

Those paragraphs were written prior to the 10th Language and Development Conference held in Cape Town in mid-October, 2013, where the Minister of Basic Education announced that:

*“South Africa has embarked on an **Incremental Introduction of African languages (IIAL)** policy. The IIAL policy will be implemented incrementally commencing in Grade 1 in 2015 and will continue until 2026 when it will be implemented in Grade 12.”*

This quotation is from the Minister’s speech to that conference, published prior to the event and included in the document attached, and downloadable below.

The document also includes remarks about the IIAL by Dr Jennifer Joshua, and remarks about Kiswahili as a *lingua franca*, by Dr Nancy Kahaviza Ayodi.

The literature on this topic is limited, and probably exists mostly within the academies. Our course must go with what we have got. The next time we run this course, we will have another look for original documents. [2015 – very little to nothing new has appeared in the mean time, except that in September the Minister of Basic Education announced that the IIAL would start in 2016, having failed to start in 2015]. But we have enough in front of us, on language in school, to allow us to have a good discussion.

It is apparent from this and from the earlier Part 7 about the legislation of the Use of Official Languages Act of 2012, that government has committed to considerable funding and employment in the area of languages. What is less clear is the ideological or other kind of motivation that is behind this commitment. The practical need is clear, but there are other, more subjective ideas involved, and these are what we would want to unpack in the future.

Because, as we have already seen, manifest need, good intentions, legislation and resources may all be present but they may add up to very little in the real world, if the politics of the whole thing do not correspond. Everything finally depends, as always, on the action of the masses.

- The above is to introduce the original reading-text: [10th Language and Development Conference Programme](#).
- To download any of the CU courses in PDF files [please click here](#).